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Elvis and Bears: A Semiotic Approach to the Red Elvises and Rokenrol (American Studies Honors Thesis)

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### Publication Date

2001

Peer reviewed

Elvis and Bears:  
A Semiotic Approach to the Red Elvises and Rokenrol

by

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American Studies Honors Thesis  
The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, NM

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### **Acknowledgments**

Special thanks to all those who read, offered suggestions, and/or were otherwise involved: Eric Porter, Alison Franks, Larry Sklar, Linda Marcas (Jackdaw), Michelle Brose, Willie Dixon, Sven Anderson, Jeremy Hackworth, Erin Callahan, and the Red Elvises (Oleg Bernov, Zhenya Rock, and Igor Yuzov).

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### **“Your Favorite Band”**

Two friends and I sit in Wild Hares, an El Paso bar, thinking that it is 9 p.m. when, in fact, it is actually 8 p.m. because El Paso is still Mountain Time, not Central as I thought. We sip Dos Equis—the only other option on tap is Shiner Bock—surprised both that the waitress admits she rarely makes a whiskey sour and that, this close to Mexico, we still have to request limes for our beer. The bar is empty, save for some locals old enough to be our fathers. We survey the room, observing a tiny stage and tinier dance floor, a sign prohibiting stripping on the pool table during regular business hours, cowboy portraits, and United Farm Workers stickers. Tucked among the various wall-coverings is a familiar red bumper sticker boasting “Kick-ass rock ‘n’ roll from Siberia.” Further along the wall, next to the poster announcing a future visit by Texas Terri and the Stiff Ones, is another assuring sign: the Red Elvies poster with today’s date on it. Eventually the band arrives, sets up their instruments, and orders us to stay put at the bar while they go feed themselves. I tell them that since we drove from Albuquerque just to see them, there is little chance of our departure. We banter with the lead guitarist about whether we will shake our booties when they play; I tell him that we will. They leave, and we wait, ready to dance and ready to have fun. We are not groupies. We are Red Heads, fans of the Red Elvies.

The Red Elvies bill themselves alternately as “your favorite band,” “kick-ass rock ‘n’ roll from Siberia,” and “the highest paid wedding band on the island of Sakhalin.”<sup>1</sup> While they also call themselves “the best of Russian rock ‘n’ roll and America’s #1 singing sweethearts,” they might more accurately be defined as a rock and roll band from Santa Monica comprised of three Russians (singer-guitarist Igor Yuzov,

singer-guitarist Zhenya Rock,<sup>\*</sup> and singer-bassist Oleg Bernov) and, until December 2000, one Texan (drummer Avi Sills) who whip Russian and American music, kitsch, and humor into their own blend of entertainment. Their music ranges from Russian folk to surf to rockabilly to disco and includes everything between; their fashion features the finest retro styles. The band began in 1996 when Yuzov and Bernov left the Russian folk n' roll group Limpopo,<sup>\*\*</sup> which, says Bernov, was “stale” and “too complicated for the average college kid.”<sup>2</sup> Rock, a “virtuoso balalaika player” and long-time friend from Bernov’s Russian hometown of Vologda, joined them.<sup>3</sup> At first, the Red Elvises played rock and roll on Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade sans drummer. Playing on the pier one night, they “ran into Andrey Baranov who just recently came from Russia and was looking for something to do.” Soon Baranov found a “real job” and was replaced by Sills, the drummer in the klezmer band of mutual friend Leo Chelyapov, who also was the fifth Red Elvis for the band’s first tour.<sup>4</sup> Playing on the pier, they drew crowds so large that access to surrounding businesses was blocked. According to Sills, “They gave us five tickets in two weeks for ordinances they hadn’t been enforcing in years. Our crowds had simply gotten too big. The businesses were doing poorly because people couldn’t get to the stores. So they had us kicked off.”<sup>5</sup>

Between 1996 and 2001, the band released seven studio albums and an alternate Russian version of one, a live double album, and a movie soundtrack. They also appeared on MTV’s *Buzzkill*, in a VH1 documentary, *Taking it to the Streets*, and as the bar band on an episode of *Melrose Place*. PBS aired a concert video titled *Live on the Pacific Ocean*, *Playboy* listed them as “ready for the big time,”<sup>6</sup> and *Bass Player* magazine did a

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<sup>\*</sup> Formerly Zhenya Kolykhanov, in 2000 the guitarist legally changed his name to Zhenya Rock.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Limpopo’s claim to fame was winning Star Search in 1990 and performing the original Kit-Kat commercial. They also contributed music to the *Armageddon* soundtrack.

cover story about Bernov and his contrabass balalaika. Rock has secured a guitar endorsement for Reverend guitars; Sills received one for DW drums. Members of the band are responsible for the soundtrack to the *Mike, Lou, and Og* television show on the Cartoon Network, and the band inspired, performed in, and recorded the soundtrack for the movie *Six String Samurai*, as well as the even more independent *Tree Girls South of Oxnard*. Even the United States government has publicized the Red Elvises, devoting to them a feature on the *Voice of America* international broadcast.<sup>7</sup> Their live shows—in bars and music festivals—have received rave reviews in newspapers across North America, and their fans have started their own e-fanzine (*The Red Pages*), listserv (currently available through Yahoo! groups), and weekly chat.<sup>8</sup>

Critical assessments of the group and its music fail to capture the complexity of the sounds. Attempts include: “zany,” “bizarre,”<sup>9</sup> “a bit of everything,”<sup>10</sup> “borscht rock,”<sup>11</sup> “musical perestroika,”<sup>12</sup> “more irresistible than matryoshka dolls and more potent than a Molotov cocktail”<sup>13</sup> and, from Rock, “like beer and cookies.”<sup>14</sup> As tricky as it is to summarize the band’s music, analyzing it is even more problematic because no theoretical discourse encompasses the range of their oeuvre. They are currently cult favorites who play most of their gigs in bars, not world-famous superstars in heavy rotation on MTV, so they are not yet famous enough to be judged by the popular culture equation (the more popular, the more indicative of the culture around them). They exhibit a do-it-yourself mentality by playing small, eclectic venues and festivals (as opposed to stadium shows) and releasing their CDs on their own Shooba-Doobah Records, but they do not identify as part of punk, indie rock, or any other specific subculture. They are neither folk nor political music, but they clearly negotiate American popular culture and

resist assimilation while they strive for economic success. Their songs are almost always somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but they do not parody outright like “Weird” Al Yankovic. With their intersection of Russian and American cultures, multiple musical styles, small but loyal fanbase, kitschy visual imagery, and use of humor and cover songs, they lie at the crossroads of pop music and defy the conventions of most pop music theory.

Thus, to make sense of the Red Elvises, my general approach is to listen to them *intelligently*, which, according to Theodore Gracyk, “occurs when one makes appropriate intertextual links and responds in terms of both musical and social contexts.”<sup>15</sup> More specifically, to read the Red Elvises’ performance, we must examine them within the context of geography (both actual and implied), era (again, both their actual time periods and the ones connoted by their music and style), and musical genre(s). To accomplish this, I will explore avenues outlined by Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman: textual analysis of the music itself for representations and symbolic meaning, critical discussion of production of the music and the institutions affecting it, and ethnographic studies of the music’s use within everyday life.<sup>16</sup> Writing as both a fan and a scholar, I will semiotically deconstruct the Red Elvises, specifically concentrating on their music (instrumentation and lyrics) and their image (literal and figurative). Rejecting aesthetic judgments and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s view that the “culture industry” manufactures a vision of “normal” life for the purpose of homogenizing the populous, I employ a “Gramscian emphasis on the resistance to hegemony among the ‘people’ and their capacity to produce their own meanings of popular texts and artifacts through ritual, recontextualization, and alternate readings.”<sup>17</sup>

With this as a basis, I will investigate some of the ways the Red Elvises, as



postmodern (but not necessarily avant-garde) musicians, decode, negotiate, and re-encode popular American culture and blur the boundary between entertainment and art, motivated by both the aesthetic and the economic. This paper is divided into three sections, all of which are loosely related to the elements of their personae that borrow from the iconic text of Elvis Presley. The first discusses the Elvises' use of musical pastiche. The second explores the construction of the Red Elvises' hybrid Russian-American identity. The third analyzes the band's relationship with sex, gender, sexuality, and desire.

## Chapter 1: The Music

The Red Elvises are many things—Russians, entertainers, sex symbols, men—but crucial to this analysis, they are a rock band, a group of individuals who have come together for the specific purpose of creating music. Serious contemplation of popular music always poses challenges; as Gracyk notes, decoding rock and roll “demands possession of a certain cultural capital.” Because popular music is not isolated from everyday life like “high art,” the norms of rock and roll may be learned with less effort than those of classical music. Rock music has conventions that define it as a genre; however, listeners are often not conscious of them. In rock music, each of the main instruments—guitar, bass guitar, drums, and voice—is equally important.<sup>18</sup> The lyrics are significant because they shape the narrative with language, but their meaning is formed by the context of the accompanying music. Instrumental music is problematic for non-musicologists to explain, but it is as expressive as the lyrics, if not more so. Nonverbal sounds evoke a fair number of culturally agreed upon responses. For example, a synthesizer often suggests science fiction or futuristic visions,<sup>19</sup> the organ creates a gloomy or psychedelic atmosphere, and a ukulele suggests Hawaii and tropical vacation. Rock songs carry multiple connotations that depend on the time, the place, the individual interacting with them, and the song’s relationship with other songs and cultural communications. The interpretation of a single song fluctuates, subject to its association with genre, media (like music videos, movies, television shows, or advertising), popular music trends, the artist’s existing persona and other works, proximity to other songs in the stream of radio, television, or recording, other versions of itself, and, of course, the listener’s personal experience.

Gracyk also suggests that the blurred “line between performance, arrangement, and composition”<sup>20</sup> further complicates the analysis of rock music. While it adds a dimension of authorship for discussion, in the case of the Red Elvises it seems simple enough to note that the individual members share producing, guitar, song writing, and singing duties. Most songs were written and sung by Yuzov or Rock, though more than a few of them credit Bernov as well. On the studio albums released before 2001, Rock and Yuzov played guitar and Bernov played bass. Their friend Andrey Baranov played drums on the first album, *Grooving to the Moscow Beat*, and Sills drummed on the next four studio discs, as well as the *Live* album. Sills left the band in December 2000, and in March 2001, the band confused fans by simultaneously releasing two albums deviating from the set pattern: Rock created, recorded, mixed, produced, and performed all the songs (with guest musicians on a few tracks) on *Bedroom Boogie*; on *Welcome to the Freakshow*, Yuzov wrote and performed the songs (with guest drummer Andrey Baranov and other musicians). Bernov co-recorded *Welcome to the Freakshow* but did not actually play on either disc.\* All three members, however, posed for the covers of both otherwise solo albums and, now that Sills has left the band, also alternate between the drums, bass, and guitar when they perform live for an audience.

The Red Elvises most noticeably complicate analysis because they defy categorization by standard musical genres. While Gracyk distinguishes between “rock and roll” and “rock music” in general—labeling “rock and roll” as the term that replaced “rhythm and blues” when white musicians like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley began to play in that style and “rock” as an all-inclusive term that encompasses subgenres such as

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\* Bernov points out that for his solo project he directed the video for “I Wanna See You Bellydance” (Bernov, e-mail to the author, 13 April 2001).

hard rock, heavy metal, punk, “alternative,” rockabilly, etc.<sup>21</sup>—the Red Elvises fit neatly into both his categories. Not only are the categories vague, many music fans would instantly disagree with the distinction. Though “rock and roll” connotes nostalgic popular music—reminiscent of or created in the past—and rock, as we recognize it, is best defined as a “musical rhythm characterized by a strong beat,” a term frequently “used to encompass most modern popular music with a rocking or swinging beat,”<sup>22</sup> or, even more simply, “music made by musicians associated with rock.”<sup>23</sup> The two expressions are often interchangeable and the line Gracyk draws does not allow for the fluidity of postmodern music.

The Red Elvises are rock musicians, rock ‘n’ rollers, and then some. Like most typical rock music, the Red Elvises’ songs feature drums, guitar, bass guitar, and vocals, which are usually sung in English (with the exception of the Russian version of the *I Wanna See You Bellydance* album). On recordings, a balalaika\* joins these more traditional rock instruments, as do a horn section, synthesizer, and drum machine. By Michael Campbell’s second definition of rock music, any music created by recognized rock musicians—the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, or even the Red Elvises—falls into the “rock music” label, even if the standard 4/4 rhythm is replaced by a waltz and the guitar is replaced by a sitar or balalaika.<sup>24</sup> Gracyk himself notes that rock music “arises from materials, not from theory,” and musicians tend to experiment.<sup>25</sup> Bernov says that the “idea behind the Red Elvises was to make music that’s so simple anyone can just tap his foot and sing along.”<sup>26</sup> Rock’s intent was not music with “three-chord progressions, but

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\* Both live and recorded, the bass guitar is often actually a contrabass balalaika—a very large, 3-stringed triangular instrument traditional to Russian music. The one seen on and after the *I Want to See You Bellydance* CD is actually a solidbody electric bass balalaika that Bernov had specially made (Victor 10; Bream 1E).

one-chord progressions.”<sup>27</sup> Originality in rock music often necessitates looking outside to other genres for inspiration, so rock, as Timothy D. Taylor notes, “is allowed to take whatever music it wants, not always without controversy, but nonetheless, a kind of voracious aesthetic is the norm.”<sup>28</sup>

Their catchy, foot-tapping music, though, spans the range of Gracyk’s definition of rock, and then it exceeds the parameters. All other terms being inadequate, the best synopsis is one of their own: the term *rokenrol*, used in one of the Red Elvises’ merchandising symbols—a cartoon, pompadour-wearing silhouette who carries a flag that reads ROKENROL—and as the official title for their 2001 tour. The band probably coined it—no one other than the band and their fans uses it—and they never define it, but obviously it characterizes their music. *Rocanrol* is the expression that denotes both early Spanish covers of English-language rock and roll hits and specifically the Mexican or Chicano rock and roll.<sup>29</sup> *Rokenrol*, then, encapsulates the Elvises and their fusion of Russian heritage and music with American imagery and rock and roll, a hybrid that can only be the result of the global state of popular music.

The Elvises’ adoption of rock music—and that of their Russian contemporaries—could be cited by cynics as an example of Western musical hegemony. Indeed, since its inception, rock and roll has been used as American propaganda (mostly through *Voice of America* broadcasts and U.S. Information Agency publications). However, Tony Kirschner argues that rock and roll’s “spatial mobility,” which “refers to the unique ways in which rock travels across geographical space, borrowing from and influencing other music in a subtle process of cultural diffusion” is more complex than mere cultural domination.<sup>30</sup> Thus, non-Western fans can and do genuinely appreciate and adopt the

music's accompanying lifestyle and transform them to fit their own needs. They have shaped—and continue to shape—their own equally authentic rock and roll aesthetic that is separate from, though related to, American musical traditions. “Rock ‘n’ roll is rock ‘n’ roll,” Bernov explains. “American rock ‘n’ roll influences a lot of other rock ‘n’ roll.”<sup>31</sup>

“Our music is meat and potatoes, vodka and power chords,” Rock says. “We prefer large sounds, fat, vintage tones.”<sup>32</sup> The Elvises claim that surf music, which, like flamenco and Eastern European folk songs, uses the Gypsy scale, is nothing but Russian folk music with electric guitars replacing the mandolins and balalaikas. States Bernov:

“It’s that Eastern minor scale—it’s so close to us it runs in our blood. We can relate to it very easily.”<sup>33</sup> Be that as it may, when the Elvises began to play surf music, *Pulp Fiction* had just repopularized Dick Dale’s version of “Miserlou” (which the Elvises covered as “Surfing in Siberia”) and, *Billboard* declared, “surf music became a craze again.”<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, the Red Elvises borrowed heavily from rockabilly, a fusion of rock and roll and hillbilly music known for the manner in which its “lyrics about sex and love were performed with gasps, hiccups, trembling, non-linguistic syllables and repetition.”<sup>35</sup> The style had gone underground after its initial success in the mid-1950s, but it regained momentary popularity with the Stray Cats in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s, mostly at the indie-rock level, because of its availability on the Internet, a newfound retro chic, and a renewed interest in swing dancing.<sup>36</sup> Like their ska band contemporaries, the Red Elvises’ recordings also often include a horn section, and their drum-machine created dance beat can be found on any of the newly developed Eighties format radio stations.

As one would suspect from their name, the Red Elvises borrow from the Elvis

Presley repertoire. Like Presley, they make use of “romantic lyricism”—full, rich vocal tone with precise intonation and sustained notes—and “boogification,” which subverts the vocal rhythms because “the *off*-beat quaver is often given an unexpected accent, producing syncopation and cross-rhythm.”<sup>37</sup> While Elvis Presley is the Red Elvises’ most obvious referent since they borrowed his name, a discussion of their musical pastiche only begins with the King of Rock and Roll. The Red Elvises are not by any means Elvis impersonators or an Elvis “indexical band.”<sup>\*</sup> Though Yuzov and Presley often bear an uncanny resemblance, the Red Elvises are original musicians. The sole Presley song they have recorded is “Blue Moon,” which only appears on their *Live* album, and the band members claim to have never actually liked Elvis’s music—or anything else about him—until they relocated to the U.S. and were introduced to the catalog of the young, skinny Elvis. When Elvis himself actually appears in their music, it is in the titles and lyrics to songs like “The Ballad of Elvis and Pricilla” and the instrumental “Elvis and Bears.”<sup>38</sup> “Everybody Disco” features the lines “Shake your pelvis” and “Show me your Elvis.”<sup>39</sup> “I Wanna Rock and Roll All Night” includes the lyrics “Some people die of overeating/And reading books on toilet bowls,” which, points out astute fan Michelle Brose, can only be a reference to Presley’s death.<sup>40</sup> More interesting might be their allusion to other musicians’ uses of Elvis. The *I Wanna See You Bellydance* version of “Sad Cowboy Song” incorporates guitar parts from Paul Simon’s “Graceland,” while “My Love is Killing Me,” which features the lines “It became a wicked game when she broke my arm” and “Don’t call me Chris, my name is Elvis,” mimics Chris Isaak, who himself connotes Elvis.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> Weinstein defines an “indexical band” as one who “skirt the tribute band’s limitations... [and] imitate the original band’s arrangements and performance style” (148).

For a more complete account of the Elvises' sound, it is fitting to regard them as Peter Nazareth views the King, an "anthology" of their influences.<sup>42</sup> Postmodern creations are hybrids, and in them authenticity is replaced by "pastiche," "the random play of the surface of styles" or an assortment of sources merged into one new composition.<sup>43</sup> Postmodern events are referential and, as noted by Deena Weinstein, "intertextual, always already immersed in a past."<sup>44</sup> The art of the postmodern musician, then, is not to create a unique or "authentic" aesthetic, but instead to seamlessly unite the assortment of elements in an original manner. The band covers songs, borrows styles and song titles, and even revises its own songs. Like Elvis, whose songs Richard Middleton suggests can be classified as blues, fast rock and roll, mannerist rock and roll, slow ballad, up-tempo ballad, or gospelized ballad,<sup>45</sup> the Red Elvises' repertoire includes a diverse collection of styles: surf music, rockabilly, lounge, Russian and Eastern European folk songs, klezmer, flamenco, ska, soukous, disco, funk, techno, Seventies-style guitar-oriented rock, and reggae.\* The Elvises start with Elvis and early rock and roll, and then zoom through musical history, blending their native land and adopted home to whip up, as Rock describes it, "a big gumbo of the Russian kitchen and the American kitchen."<sup>46</sup>

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\* For instance, "Surfing in Siberia" (*Surfing in Siberia*) and "Love Pipe" (*Surfing in Siberia*) are straight-ahead surf songs. "Shooba-Doobah (Elvis' Vacation)" (*Grooving to the Moscow Beat*), "Elvis and Bears" (*Grooving to the Moscow Beat*), "Please don't Tell Me what I did Last Night" (*Grooving to the Moscow Beat*), "Red Lips, Red Eyes, Red Stockings" (*Better than Sex*), "Wild Man" (*Better than Sex*), and "Jumping Cat Boogie" (*Better than Sex*) are all rockabilly songs. Lounge songs include "Harriet" (*Grooving to the Moscow Beat*), "Here I am in Hollywood" (*Surfing in Siberia*), and "I'm not that kind of Guy" (*I Wanna See You Bellydance*). "Scorchi Chorniye" (*Grooving to the Moscow Beat*) has its base in a Russian folk song and "My Darling Lorraine" (*Surfing in Siberia*) and the live sing-along "Flaming Cheese" (*Your Favorite Band Live*), which has strains of "Hava Nagila," are rooted in klezmer. Flamenco makes an appearance in songs like "Gypsy Heart" (*I Wanna See You Bellydance*) and "Girl from Malibu" (*Shake Your Pelvis*). "Stewardess in Red" (*Better than Sex*) is a ska song; "Wonderful Night" (*Better than Sex*) is, surprisingly for a Russian rock band, soukous. Not surprisingly, "Everybody Disco" (*Shake Your Pelvis*) and "Closet Disco Dancer" (*Better than Sex*) are both disco. "We Got the Groove" (*Shake Your Pelvis*) is a funk song, while "City of Angels" (*Shake Your Pelvis*) is techno and, according to Bernov, Thai pop (e-mail, 13 April 2001). "A Kegga Beer and Potato Chips" (*Welcome to the Freakshow*) is reggae. Quite a bit of the Bedroom Boogie album is seventies-style guitar-oriented rock like "Sticky Little Girl."



The Red Elvises must have been teens in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when western rock music was “the dominant, though nonofficial, cultural form practiced by Soviet youth.” Though officially unavailable, music by the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Donna Summer circulated widely through the U.S.S.R., and Moscow alone was home to thousands of amateur bands, despite a system where only official, state-approved bands could play in the majority of (state-owned) venues.<sup>47</sup> Bernov cites as influences the Western bands Deep Purple, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and Tom Waits, as well as the Russian band Time Machine, while Rock adds to the list AC/DC—who he first saw for about 10 seconds on a Soviet broadcast attempting to demonize the West—the Doors, and Jimi Hendrix.<sup>48</sup> They never directly sample parts of other artists’ songs, which Gracyk’s compares to quotation,<sup>49</sup> but continuing his analogy reveals the Red Elvises’ paraphrasing, summarizing, critiquing, and responding to the styles and songs of the musicians to whom they allude.

As Weinstein might argue, in postmodern, postpunk fashion, they appropriate musical artifacts from the past—usually known to the audience through other cultural channels like television, film, or retro radio stations<sup>50</sup>—and offer them a rokenrol twist. The Red Elvises’ cover of Chuck Berry’s “Rock n’ Roll Music” serves as a declaration of their musical intent—playing in the manner of good old-fashioned rock and roll.<sup>51</sup> Their transformation of Dick Dale’s “Miserlou” into “Surfing in Siberia” defines their Russian-American musical concoction, as does the appropriation of Russian folk song “Orchi Chorniye” (“Scorchi Chorniye” to Red Elvises fans), which was furnished with English lyrics, and the Andrew Sisters’ “Bei Mir Bist du Schoen,” which, as “My Darling Lorraine” is labeled a “traditional Jewish song” with new lyrics.<sup>52</sup> As the band played

with musical styles, Brahms “Hungarian Dance #5” became a surf tune; “Rock n’ Roll Music” became a lounge song, and Tom Waits’ “Telephone Call from Istanbul” (modified with a new instrumental intro as “Hello from Istanbul”) became rockabilly.<sup>53</sup> Sometimes, rather than covering songs, the Red Elvises’ merely appropriate well-known song titles and substitute their own melodies and lyrics. The slow ballad “Good Golly Miss Molly” is not Little Richard’s version, the rockabilly “I Wanna Rock n’ Roll All Night” would never be confused with the Kiss anthem, and the Chris Isaak-style “All I Wanna Do (Is Make Love to You)” shares nothing with Heart’s hit.<sup>54</sup>

The Red Elvises often create unlikely sequences in the spirit of pastiche. In the 1970s and 1980s, Russian rockers rediscovered traditional Russian music and instruments, as well as disco and electronica, and incorporated them into their rock music.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, the Red Elvises have fused unlikely styles into appealing new sounds. *Shake Your Pelvis* features a motley assortment of disco, techno, surf, flamenco, and funk. A sample of *Better than Sex* reveals a song evocative of Tom Waits, a disco tune, and a rockabilly ditty right in a row. The Red Elvises unite big band horns, a drum machine dance beat, and surf guitar in “200 Pounds of Pure Love,” while “Girl from Malibu” mixes flamenco with big band horns and the drum machine.<sup>56</sup> “After the Carnival” appears to combine surf with Asian pop.<sup>57</sup> The Osmonds boasted of being “a little country and a little rock and roll”; for the Red Elvises, that is just the beginning.

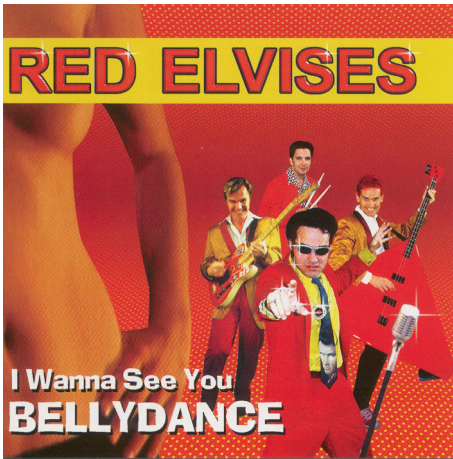
## Chapter 2: Image

While rokenrol is musically remarkable, the montage of surf, rockabilly, disco, funk, techno, and Eastern European folk music as performed by Los Angeles-dwelling native Russians is also culturally significant. While bands like the Sex Pistols and the Monkees were constructed by management specifically to be sold to audiences,<sup>58</sup> the Red Elvises consciously invented their *own* image, emphasizing in their name their nationality and rock and roll. Each part of their image is a constructed element of the band's performance. The Elvises are serious musicians, but they are also theatrically trained entertainers with the intent of creating spectacle.<sup>59</sup> Gracyk cautions that the promotional images of musicians are a "major trap" because the "sense of reality inherent in the photograph creates a particularly overwhelming aura of authenticity, inviting us to formulate and retain dubious assumptions,"<sup>60</sup> but the visual effect of the Red Elvises, as seen in their stage show, photographs, CD jackets, web page, and television and film appearances, warrants substantial exploration because of its vital role in the rokenrol performance.

To illustrate their name, the band embraces the color red: Most of the band's instruments are red, most notably Bernov's contrabass balalaika, "Big Red."<sup>\*</sup> Their van is red, as well. Their web page has a red background, and *I Wanna See You Bellydance*, *Shake Your Pelvis*, and the *Live* CD have predominantly red covers. Their music draws on rock and roll from the past, and so does their fashion. They often wear suits, complete with ties that would complement a lounge act. On the cover of *I Wanna See You Bellydance*, Yuzov wears a suit with a yellow shirt and Elvis Presley tie, Bernov and

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\* One exception is the yellow bass they brought with them on the 2001 tour because "Big Red" was too unwieldy for their constant instrument swapping.



**Figure 1: I Wanna See You Bellydance, cover**



**Figure 2: Bedroom Boogie, cover**

Rock sport yellow jackets with red trim, and Sills has a red jacket with a wildly-patterned, large-collar shirt (Figure 1). Similarly, on the cover of *Surfing in Siberia*, the band, clad in snazzy suits, rides a surfboard. Yuzov has a red sports coat and a pair of swim trunks; Bernov, Rock, and Sills are dressed in black pants and white jackets with red lapels. *Bedroom Boogie* features Rock and Bernov in red suits, and Yuzov in a purple one (Figure 2).

They accessorize with flashy shoes in a variety of reds, flames, snakeskin, and cow-print. An entire section of *The Red Pages* is devoted to photos of the band's shoes,<sup>61</sup> spawned by the scene in *Six String Samurai* where Death, angry that the Elvises have failed their mission to assassinate Buddy, kills the band but pauses first to admire their shoes. He and his minions then take the shoes for themselves. The band then tops their ensembles with conspicuous hair-dos or hats. All the members have dipped into the hair dye: Yuzov sports an almost-Elvis pompadour that was, for several months, "Pimpin' Purple."<sup>62</sup> Sills streaked his hair red. Rock's hair instantly dates photographs of the band. He has gone from brown (*Grooving to the Moscow Beat* and *Better than Sex*) to platinum pompadour (*Surfing in Siberia*) to surfer/rockstar mullet (*Bedroom Boogie* and *Welcome*



**Figure 3: Bernov and Ronald McDonald, photo sent to the *Red Pages* by the band *to the Freakshow*) and tends to favor cowboy hats or whatever the audience lends him.\*** Bernov’s trademark red coif matches his enormous red triangle bass; from the back, he could easily be mistaken for Ronald McDonald (Figure 3).\*\*

Appropriately, Bernov considers himself a clown.<sup>63</sup> “I like to look like a fool; everybody is scared of looking stupid but everyone else likes to see somebody else acting like a fool.”<sup>64</sup> In their videos, he often brings his face right up to the camera, jumping in the sand while he strums the giant balalaika bass or pushing children—dressed as the “young Red Elvises”—out of his way. On stage, he might speak through a bullhorn. The point is to be noticed. The band jumps, wiggles, and bounces on stage, sometimes synchronizing their stage antics, one member or another often capturing the spotlight for a moment. Explains Bernov, “The band was pretty much developed on the street. It’s that simple: If you suck—nobody gives you any money—so you learn to be a bad-ass. If you can perform on the street and get the crowd going... after that [sic] performing anywhere

\* One frequent contributor *The Red Pages*, Kayt, tells a story of a hat she made for herself but was pleased to lend to Rock while he performed. <<http://www.redelvises.com/fanclub/0006/fieldrep.html>>.

\*\* When I saw the band play in El Paso in March 2001, they were wearing t-shirts and sensible shoes. Bernov’s hair was blond, which almost matched his normal sized bass. The bass balalaika was nowhere to be found.

else is a peace of cake.”<sup>65</sup> The overall effect of the Red Elvises is a kitschy pastiche of Russian and American glitz and humor, combining the color red with retro chic. With their Russian accents, flashy suits, lyrics about sex and beautiful women, and captivating rock and roll, the Red Elvises seem like they should have fallen out of the bar in a James Bond—or at least his spoof, *Austin Powers*—film somewhere.\* As it is, their *Six String Samurai* cameo roles as post-apocalyptic Russian rockers are more than appropriate.

The band has a full appreciation for kitsch, both Russian and American. Kitsch, which Theresa Sabonis-Chafee defines as “manufactured sentimentality,” can be “utopian-nostalgic,” which seeks a return to a mythical past where everything was better; “ironic-nostalgic,” which longs for the mythical past without trying to recreate it; or camp, which embraces obvious kitsch or bad art and recycles and resignifies the symbolism.<sup>66</sup> Both Russian and American camp relies heavily on Cold War icons for material. Currently, Communist artifacts are manufactured in Russia only as campy souvenirs for tourists to buy and take home, and the use of Soviet symbols by youths generally makes the older generation uncomfortable, much like the adoption of the swastika by 1970s British and American punks upset their parents.<sup>67</sup> In the U.S., Soviet and Russian kitsch is marketed to collectors through specialty catalogs like the *Sovietski Collection*.<sup>68</sup> *Six String Samurai* is built entirely around the kitschy pop culture Russian stereotype. In the film, the Russians dropped the atomic bomb on the United States in 1957, creating an apocalyptic state. The only city that survived was Lost Vegas, where Elvis reigned as king until his death. Buddy (a sword-toting, alcoholic Buddy Holly) is off to Vegas to stake his claim to the throne. Both Death and the Russian army want to

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\* According to Jackdaw, the “I Wanna See You Bellydance” video has an *Austin Powers* feel (e-mail to the author, 24 Apr. 2001).

stop him: Death is a heavy metal virtuoso who wants the kingdom for himself; the Russian general wants to destroy rock and roll because “it is too loud” and he prefers folk music, polka especially.

Though based around the Red Elvises’ music, *Six String Samurai* was written by Americans and thus offers an American view of the Russian-American rock and roll cultural intersection. However, the Red Elvises often appear to have learned about American culture from watching similar B-grade films and television; they incorporate icons from Elvis flicks (Presley himself), Westerns (cowboys), science fiction (space travel), James Bond (suave pick-up lines and a never-ending stream of pretty girls), the beach party genre (surf music and the beach), and blaxploitation (funk and disco) into their image. They play with some of the sillier images from American popular culture; Jesus came to one song’s narrator, like he might a televangelist, and told him to “Boogie on the Beach.”<sup>69</sup> “Welcome to the Freakshow” is, curiously enough, about a circus sideshow, and “Techno Surfer” might be one of the first songs ever to have cybersex as a theme.<sup>70</sup> The band embraces disco, calling for everyone to “disco like the boys in San Francisco” and to publicize their secret lives as disco fans.<sup>71</sup> “Sad Cowboy Song” pokes fun at country and western songs with a cowboy who “ain’t got no pants to cover [his] ass,” whose “guitar ain’t got strings” and whose “gun doesn’t shoot.”<sup>72</sup> “San Antone” takes the white trash stereotype to extreme with the suggestion of “jogging in [one’s] boxers” and buying a trailer home.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the silliest piece of Americana the Red Elvises exploit is Elvis Presley. According to legend, Presley, wearing a red dress, came to Yuzov in a dream and told him to name his band the Red Elvises.<sup>74</sup> Bernov also says that the band chose him for



**Figure 4: Grooving to the Moscow Beat, insert**

their name because “Elvis is kind of embodiment of the American dream—this truck driver from Tennessee who ultimately made it.”<sup>75</sup> At this point in time, Elvis is merely a simulacrum: an icon of capitalism and the personification of rock and roll (itself a figure of capitalism), sex, success, and excess. He has “been articulated to mythical struggles between high culture and low culture, youth culture and adult culture, rural culture and urban culture, rebellion and conformity, North and South, the sacred and the secular, and so on,”<sup>76</sup> but he is also an “all-purpose punchline” who got fat, began to perform bad music, and finally died on the toilet.<sup>77</sup> In his rise from poverty to fame and fortune and then his death from too much food and too many drugs, he epitomizes everything both fantastic and tragic about capitalism. His likeness graces velvet paintings, collectors’ plates, figurines, and postage stamps. His mansion is a shrine, and his impersonators are legendary.

Symbolic of the musical miscegenation that brought forth modern rock, Elvis is the perfect vehicle for El Vez, the “Mexican Elvis,” to co-opt in his Chicano message and the ideal symbol for the Red Elvises to juxtapose with Communism, as they do in one illustration on the CD insert for *Grooving to the Moscow Beat* (Figure 4). It features



Bernov, Rock, and Yuzov, clad in enormous, black pompadour wigs, inserted into a picture of Russian soldiers. The band members are in color—decked out in red and yellow suits—holding their instruments, and grinning; the somber-faced soldiers are in black and white. The caption reads “Early signs of nonconformity in the Russian Army.” Elvis embodied the decadence from which the Soviet state attempted to shield their citizens.

As Red (Russian) Elvises (American rock and rollers), the band negotiates the Russian-American cultural borderland with humor. As Anna Krylova explains is typical of Soviet jokes, \* they regard Communism cynically.<sup>78</sup> *Grooving to the Moscow Beat*, which by far adopts the heaviest Russian shtick, claims on its back cover that it “was recorded conspiratorially in a dark cell, during long, cold Siberian winter nights.” The pretense of secrecy evokes the first Western recordings of Russian rock bands, which actually were smuggled out of Russia in 1986 to be released in the United States,<sup>79</sup> and posits Russia as a dreary, lifeless land from which one runs as far and fast as possible, and as the butt of the capitalist joke. On the CD jacket on *Better than Sex*, each of the band members’ faces is attached to a Red Star Communist medal. The jacket also chronicles their mythical journey in comic form. First, the three Russians surf away from Siberia on Bernov’s balalaika bass. (In reality, they emigrate from Russia as musicians.) In the water, they encounter Sills, the American, who guides them to California. (Their initial venue was the Santa Monica Pier.) In gratitude, they hire him as their drummer. Finally, the last frame depicts one of their concerts: the mostly-female audience dances,

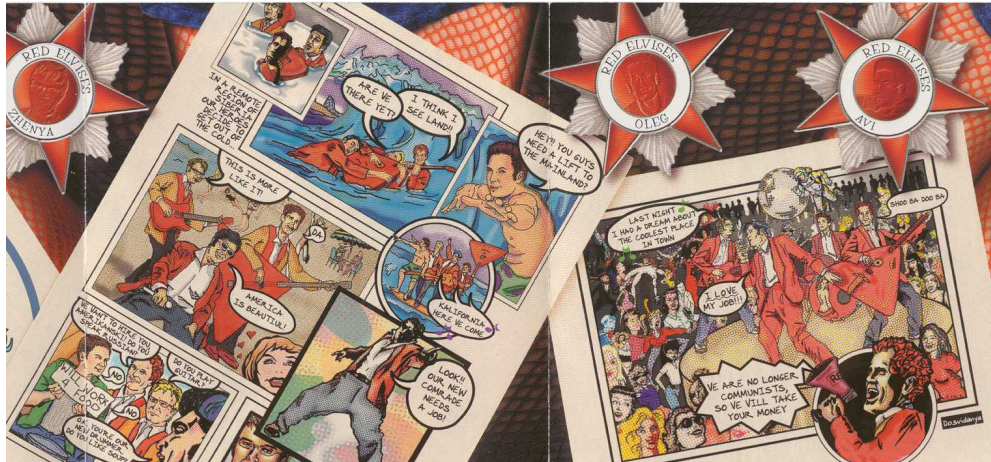
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\* An example is a joke where Mikhail Gorbachev is asked: “Mikhail Sergeevich, how do you understand socialism?”

He replies, “It is when everyone lives on one’s salary and keeps silent.”

“What if we give people full freedom and allow them to become rich?”

“Then it will be capitalism—but capitalism is not our way” (Barker 258).



**Figure 5: Better than Sex, insert**

Yuzov thinks “I love my job,” and Bernov announces over his bullhorn, “We are no longer communists, so we will take your money” (Figure 5). The message—Communism is bad, capitalism is good—is hardly subtle. The Red Elvises play incompetent Russian villains in *Six String Samurai*; their manager is known as Special Agent Vladimir G., they cite Fidel Castro (along with the Spice Girls and Elvis and Priscilla Presley) as an influence, and their older guitars (which are seen in *Six Stream Samurai*) feature Communist insignia. The first three albums have multiple songs, like “Grooving to the Moscow Beat,” “Elvis and Bears,” “Siberia,” Brahms’ “Hungarian Dance #5,” “Ukrainian Dance #13,” and “Gypsy Heart,” that draw from a Communist Bloc perspective for inspiration.<sup>80</sup> Later songs obsess less about the Elvises’ Russian ethnicity, but even “I Will Come Back” on 2001’s *Bedroom Boogie* proclaims that “tonight, it’s Russian style.”

Taylor remarks that nonwestern musicians, even those who have been influenced exclusively by popular Western music, “have demands of [cultural] authenticity made of them by western listeners.”<sup>81</sup> Both the Red Elvises and the Leningrad Cowboys, the Finnish stars of *The Leningrad Cowboys Go America* and the masterminds behind the

Leningrad Cowboy beer, vodka, and Helsinki restaurants, fulfill this demand by claiming Siberia as home, though neither has any bona fide Siberian members. The Red Elvices, who recorded their *I Wanna See You Bellydance* album, with a few additions, subtractions, and idiomatic lyric changes, in Russian, are, in fact, genuinely Russian. Yet, the Red Elvices' mastery of English song-writing and humor could easily lead one to have some doubts; any white guys attempting to act "Russian" could exclude the articles a, an, and the from their English speech and master the balalaika if they so desired. After all, suggests Taylor, Western audiences instinctively doubt any claims of "authenticity" made by Western—that is, white—musicians.<sup>82</sup> Though they chat in Russian with each other between songs during their show, one reviewer even denied the possibility of the band members being of Russian origin because they had California license plates.<sup>83</sup>

It is significant, too, that the Red Elvices' adopted not just the United States as home, but that they selected Los Angeles, the geographic incarnation of American excess, as their base. Siberia connotes the extreme of Russian misery; in contrast, the Golden State, with its cars, money, food, music, and celebrities, becomes the land of opportunity, *Baywatch*-style. It is home to surf music and beaches, gorgeous women (like the "Girl from Malibu" who "had the perfect silhouette"<sup>84</sup>), good weather ("It's illegal to rain here," declares Bernov.<sup>85</sup>), and the capitalistic abundance that is the Hollywood entertainment industry. LA may be impersonal—according to the song, "Siberia" is "land of cottage cheese and happy smiles" while one hits Hollywood because he "want[s] to be a movie star," but spends his time instead "getting loaded at the bar."<sup>86</sup> Siberia is at best a rustic wasteland—generally considered a cold, dark, isolated, and repressed region lacking in every human comfort; Los Angeles is a sun-soaked, glitzy urban center.

The Red Elvises could only originate in the United States, where everything, even identity, is a commodity. The musicians are Russian; the band is American, the end product of the fabled melting pot. As products of the “post-” world (postmodern, post-Cold War, post-punk), the Red Elvises are capitalists who market their Russian ethnicity as camp. Like the Leningrad Cowboys, who developed a similar pastiche of heavy metal, ska, rockabilly, Russian folk tunes, and Western rock songs covered with the assistance of the Red Army Choir as back-up singers, they sell the failure of Communism as ironic-nostalgic Cold War kitsch. The appeal of rokenrol, which is based equally in balalaikas and Gypsy scale, guitar solos and drum machines, is that it not only allows for the wedding of Eastern and Western cultural elements but, by operating in the space between the two cultures, actually encourages it. Snow and sand merge as one when Dick Dale’s “Miserlou” (itself an adaptation of a Greek folk dance) becomes “Surfing in Siberia.” The band twists the folk song “Orchi Chorniye” into “Scorchi Chorniye” with lyrics that start “Let’s take the Greyhound bus to California/All that fancy food will make us hornier.” Bernov’s “Sad Cowboy Song” character, who was born in Kentucky on *Grooving to the Moscow Beat*, switches homelands for a Chernobyl birth on *I Wanna See You Bellydance*, presenting the audience with a Russian (Ukrainian) cowboy whose origin is not the wild western plains but the site of nuclear meltdown.

American and Russian dreams meet above the surface of the Earth in the iconography of outer space, exemplified by songs about the “Space Cowboy,” the lonely “Rocketman,” the “200 Flying Girls” about whom a Cosmonaut fantasizes, the girl who traveled a “Million Miles” to come to Earth, and the intergalactic “Rocketship”<sup>87</sup> lovemobile. Perhaps the most visible site of U.S.-Soviet tensions since the 1950s, space

was the key to world domination during the Cold War. Space exploration was a sign of national wealth and technological skill, and it indicated the nuclear capabilities the country might be hiding. The space race epitomizes Soviet and American Cold War competition; the decrepit space station Mir was said to symbolize the decayed Russian state, and the international space station signifies the new era of U.S.-Russian cooperation. Space explorers like the “Rocketman” are “lonely and horny,” constantly learning about a new foreign world like immigrants or a touring band. The synthesizer of the space-themed songs connotes science fiction and fantasy, shiny, silver jumpsuits, and *Star Trek*, home to lovely extraterrestrial ladies and the seduction of Captain James T. Kirk. Space exploration is a common theme among surf musicians (such as Man...or Astroman and Laika and the Cosmonauts). Like the cowboy, the astronaut is a glamorous symbol of independence and masculinity out to tame the frontier.

“It’s capitalism, baby,” Bernov proclaims as the Red Elvises gleefully spoof and commodify Communism.<sup>88</sup> Instead of espousing the standard paradoxical independent music discourse against “selling out” in which professional musicians are expected to deny any market influence, the Red Elvises have incorporated capitalism into their image. The band members intentionally quit Communism when they left Russia. Rather than suffering for the sake of art’s authenticity, the Red Elvises turn to comedic spectacle. The Red Elvises successfully transform Communism and capitalism simultaneously into both jokes and art. “We have a huge advantage not growing up in the capitalist system,” Bernov says. “We came up with a product, learned how to sell it ... The truth is, it’s not that complicated being a capitalist. You just be true to yourself.”<sup>89</sup> While they oversimplify free-market economics, downplaying their constant efforts to promote their

music and merchandise, the performed swanky lifestyle is infectious.

### Chapter 3: Russian Romance

“Is everybody happy?” Rock asks over the first chords of “Red Lips, Red Eyes, Red Stockings,” the song that opens *Better than Sex*. The “crowd” answers with cheers, and the song begins. “We make good time,” Bernov explains. “People like that. This is what’s contagious, because we have a good time and people say, ‘Hey, I want to have a good time as well.’”<sup>90</sup> Declares their manager Vladimir Goncharov, “We’re trying to take all these things like Elvis, surf music, traditional Russian music and make fun, have fun, and the people watching will have fun.”<sup>91</sup> In rock and roll, fun means sex, and the Red Elvies have infused their rokenrol accordingly. Sex is a commodity, part of the image they market. Like *Playboy*, the Red Elvies promote the independent, urban swinger lifestyle, where fun—manifested in music, sex, fashion, and materialism—is the main concern.

As good capitalists, the band knows that sex sells. Bernov asserts that they titled their fourth album *Better than Sex* because it is “a catchy phrase like Vogue magazine [covers]—‘the secret of orgasm.’ ... It’s shameless. It’s capitalism.”<sup>92</sup> The band’s merchandise features a souvenir condom, a vast majority of their songs have sexual or romantic lyrics, and the album covers are laden with sexually suggestive images. Three of the covers feature stereotypically sexualized female objects of desire: *I Wanna See You Bellydance* features the naked left half of an anonymous woman’s torso (whose breasts are covered by the band’s name) while the band glitters, 1970s rockstar-style, and grins at the camera in the background. *Better than Sex* pictures a painting of a scantily clad woman straddling a guitar (Figure 6).<sup>\*</sup> A cartoon girl in a short, tight, red, two-piece dress reveals her white panties and shakes her pelvis on the cover of *Shake Your Pelvis*

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\* The cover is a portrait by Rock of his girlfriend at the time, Natasha Ni (Bernov, e-mail, 13 April 2001).



**Figure 6: Better than Sex, cover**

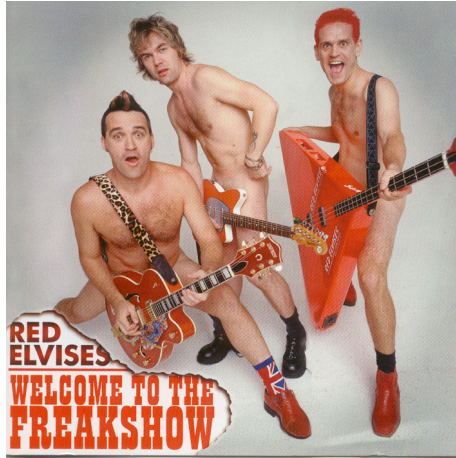


**Figure 7: Shake Your Pelvis, cover**

(Figure 7). Female characters in Red Elvives songs exist to be lovers. They are primarily described as objects of a masculine sexual gaze, seen and admired. The typical women about whom the Elvives sing are classically beautiful like the 200 flying girls in the rocketman’s dream, who are all tall and blonde, or the “Girl from Malibu,” who has “a perfect silhouette.” The singer personas love and lust after women with “Red Lips, Red Eyes, Red Stockings,” girls seen “walking down on Venice Beach,” and “pretty women, ... ugly, too/When they’re dressed in purple, or if they’re dressed in blue.” The musician “think[s he is] falling in love with” the stewardess who smiles as she brings him drinks, the “lonely and horny” cosmonaut dreams of “girls and a six-pack of beer,” and the tourist from Tulsa wants to “walk along the beach and make sweet love to” the “Girl from Malibu.” Often, they are described in terms of food: “Harriet” is described as a “honey pie,” “chocolate cake,” and “well-done steak”; the “baby” who likes to cha-cha-cha and tango is “sweeter than a coke and sexier than mango.”<sup>93</sup>

Sexual imagery in the Red Elvives’ world is less about masculinity than it is about capitalism. The women they describe are the women of *Playboy*, beautiful trophies for the ultra-capitalist. Yet, they are willing sexual partners and have agency—careers, active





**Figure 8: Welcome to the Freakshow, cover**

roles, lives outside of the narrators' lust, and the ability to choose whether, when, and how to interact with narrators. The band has a special fascination with women who capitalize on their sexuality. They cite the Spice Girls as an influence, use Britney Spears' picture for the link to Mr. Fabulous' web page, and at one point had on their web site links to homepages for both Spears and porn star Mimi Miyagi, who Bernov says, "got [his] deepest respect" after he read an article in the *Village Voice* about how she made half a million dollars in a year from the porn web site she designed herself.<sup>94</sup>

Like rockabilly musicians of the past, the Red Elvises have intentionally "cultivated a wild, sexy image and performed with intensity and abandon, all of which contributed to their popularity and impact."<sup>95</sup> The most recent CDs construct the band members themselves as the sexual objects. The three musicians stand on a bed holding their instruments on *Bedroom Boogie*, and Rock looks up at the camera with a seductive pout. On the cover of *Welcome to the Freakshow*, the band poses nude except for their shoes, socks, and instruments (Figure 8). As sexual subjects, they sing about dancing,<sup>96</sup> which has long been a sexual metaphor, and more explicitly about sexual encounters and desire. The songs' narrators are generally flirtatious, which sometimes leads them to sex,

as in “All I Wanna Do (is make love to you)” when a couple spontaneously decides to get together.<sup>97</sup>

Often the playful exchange stands alone: the narrator in “Pilot John” flirts with a waitress because he cannot tip her; “Hanky Panky Kind of Love” is the story of a game of look and look away between the narrator and a girl on Venice Beach. Often, these masculine narrative personas lie, cheat, and take rock and roll much more seriously than they do relationships. The narrator in “I’m not that Kind of Guy” was found in his lover’s bed kissing her sister. We never find out why the former lover is upset in “Voodoo Doll,” where she “grabs a needle” and “shoves it through [his] heart,” but she is obviously motivated by vengeance while he is “having a good time patching holes in [his] head” and would “rather rock and roll.” The “Wild Man” “like[s] these crazy games [his lover] play[s]” because “they make [him] feel so good.” Love is depicted as fun but not serious, and sex is casual, from “I pulled up a chair and we started to kiss” to “We were doin’ it fast, we were doin’ it slow/She told me nothin’ but go daddy-o” all within the same song-constructed night of “Red Lips, Red Eyes, Red Stockings.”<sup>98</sup>

Through their music and image, the Red Elvises are established as sexy, sensitive, and funny—the perfect boyfriends onto whom the audience can project our fantasies. The message boards on the Red Elvises’ and the individual band members’ web pages overflow with gushing from would-be groupies. Regularly, fans ask whether the band members are single, and each board has at least one message that reads something along the lines of “I want to have your babies!” The band members play the role of sexually-charged, romantic, foreign heroes, and they encourage audience participation in this performance. Live, Yuzov, who has mastered the Elvis pelvic thrust, pompadour, and



**Figure 9: Bellydancing girls at the Launchpad, Albuquerque, April 21, 2001** vocal style, “leaps onto tabletops, performs synchronized leg kicks, and seduces girls from the stage while their muscle-bound boyfriends look on in bewilderment.”<sup>99</sup> Rock, known for his tight pants, beckons to be touched and grants the fans an R-rated hip-grating show, as does Bernov, who announces on the *Live* album that he “want[s] to make love to all of you, right now!” They smile and flirt with the girls right in front of them, punctuate their lyrics with suggestive hand gestures (like the apparently universal signs for breast-fondling and “curves”), and call for everyone else to move in closer and shake their butts. \* While the uninitiated audience may not respond immediately, the music, from klezmer to flamenco to rock and roll to techno, is made for dancing, and it inspires hip-shaking and breast-shimmying—even in audience members (like myself) who would never dance otherwise. By the end of the show, gaggles of “bellydancing” women have typically joined the band on stage much to the dismay of any security guards present (Figure 9). Often fans place the band’s bumperstickers on suggestive body parts, and multiple field reports on *The Red Pages* mention bras thrown on stage and the band dropping their pants for a song or two—or even a set.

The Red Elvises announce that they “will be your favorite band” and they are:

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\* When we sat at the bar before the El Paso show, Rock walked by and personally asked my group of friends whether we were going to dance while they played.

They borrow capitalist symbolism, music, sex appeal, and a name from the toolkit of Elvis Presley, the archetypal Dionysian avatar whose pelvic thrust drove women wild. One moment they are Dick Dale, another, they are Parliament-Funkadelic.<sup>100</sup> The *Arizona Republic*'s Randy Cordova compares the four-piece to the Monkees: Yuzov, when not mistaken for Elvis Presley, is the “romantic one (the Davy Jones of the group)”; Bernov is the “funny one” or Micky Dolenz. Rock, who is also a fairly successful artist in the moments when he is not playing with the Red Elvises, is the “artistic one” (Peter Tork), and Sills was Michael Nesmith, the “thoughtful” Red Elvis.<sup>101</sup> However, Red Elvises fan Jackdaw disagrees with Cordova's choice of Red Elvis-Monkees pairing and would instead couple Rock and Nesmith as “serious artists” and Sills, who was once bachelor #1 on *The Dating Game*, with Tork as the “sweet, cute, goofy” members.<sup>102</sup> Similar parallels can be drawn between the Elvises and every band, from the Beatles to the Backstreet Boys, who has a legion of screaming female fans.

However, the Red Elvises know that they are not Elvis, the Beatles, or the Monkees. The Elvises stand on the shoulders of giants, but the assembled construction, contextualized for the post-Cold War era through kitsch and the bricolage of earlier prophets, is all their own. While rock music can be read, as Gracyk notes, as “a manifestation of the aesthetics of Romanticism, the aesthetic movement that elevates that artist's originality, emotion, spontaneity, and invention as the measure of aesthetic success,”<sup>103</sup> rock and roll only begins there. The Elvises play with the rockstar image and parody it, constructing themselves as suave womanizers, and then laughing at the image. The Red Elvises parody the common love song, expressing stereotypical rock and roll masculine desire in such a way that it inspires giggling and out-of-tune sing-alongs in

terrible fake Russian accents. The songs are intentionally humorous. In “Suzanna,” a telephone solicitor interrupts and ruins the narrator’s attempt at seduction. “Harriet,” it turns out, “though she looked like a girl . . . was a guy.” The narrator in the chuckle-provoking lounge song “I’m not that Kind of Guy” is upset because his girlfriend left him “for a schmuck who makes better dough,” but he acknowledges only in passing that she stopped sending “lovely cards with birds and butterflies” when she saw him kissing her sister in her bed. In “My Love is Killing Me,” the girl breaks the narrator’s arm, gives him “bruises and cuts,” “scars on [his] nuts,” and transgression of transgressions, calls him “Chris” instead of the preferred “Elvis.” One narrator gave his folk-singer girlfriend a ring and only got “the finger” in return; another was left only with the bills from his lover’s 900-number phone calls.<sup>104</sup>

Punk tore down rockstar iconography; the Red Elvises build it up again and then juxtapose it with Do-It-Yourself ideals. They tour in a van, release their CDs on their own label, and take the time to hang out with their fans, visit the online weekly Red Chat, and even make suggestions about the occasional thesis. The *Red Pages* are hosted on the [www.redelvises.com](http://www.redelvises.com) domain alongside the band’s official pages; “Naked Rockstar” chides celebrities who do not properly appreciate their fans.<sup>105</sup> En masse, fans are thanked on several albums. The band makes every fan feel special, taking the time at shows to sign autographs and pose for pictures before and after the show. Notes fan Matt Mason, “Def Leopard never did that when they came through Omaha back in my high school years. Neither did Pink Floyd either time I saw them. That’s why The Red Elvises are My Favorite Band, as they just hung out with the crowd and signed all my Red Elvises CD’s [sic].”<sup>106</sup> Likewise, Jackdaw remembers giving Yuzov one of her earrings

to wear for a photograph. “Later,” she says, she “saw him sitting at the bar, surrounded by crumpet, and he was still wearing it!”<sup>107</sup>

It is worth noting that the fans are not the stereotypical twenty-something urban hipsters typically associated with the 1990s rockabilly and surf revivals. It is the humor and variety that wins the band its population of fans, so while some fans are indeed in their twenties, frequent Red Elvies listserv posters and *Red Pages* contributors range from teenagers to Baby-Boomers. When the band plays festivals, dancing audience members are reported to range from those whose age is still in single digits to those with seven or eight decades behind them. Michelle Brose noticed that the fans who visit the *Red Chat* and *The Red Pages* regularly—perhaps the most openly devoted fans—tend to be female and “have, if not impressive academic credentials, then at least the cultural knowledge to talk like a member of the intellectual elite.”<sup>108</sup> Needless to say, Red Heads are devoted to the band. *The Red Pages* is updated with new contributions monthly. One fan created PC cursors, icons, and wallpaper, as well as Absolut Vodka-style “ads” that she offers on her website.<sup>109</sup> Another purchased a red 1955 Chevy truck and named it the Red Elvis.<sup>110</sup> Yet another has decorated her car with Red Elvies decals and is in the process of devoting an entire room of her house to the band.<sup>111</sup> Many fans willingly travel across the country—taking roadtrips with otherwise strangers met through the Red Chat—just to see the band.

## Conclusion

I knew I was addicted the moment I replaced my mouse arrow cursor with a red balalaika. When my stereo became the “all Red Elvises, all the time” station, I wondered if I should worry. Soon, the thesis was born, Zhenya Rock played guitar on the wallpaper of my computer, and my cell phone’s “welcome message” greeted me with “bebopalula.” Several months into the project, my neighbor finally surrendered to his desire for sleep and tromped upstairs and to complain—apologizing as he did so—about hearing the music into the wee hours night after night. I made new friends with other Red Elvises fans, and I converted several of my old ones. For spring break, I even considered following the band through Texas, but I limited myself to one of the El Paso shows. There, I told Rock and Yuzov that the band was the subject of this paper. Rock merely looked at me strangely, probably not taking me seriously,<sup>\*</sup> while Yuzov told me that he hoped that I would write good things and quipped that he can cook. Multiple drafts of the paper later, Bernov was e-mailing me suggestions and corrections, and reintroducing myself to the band won me warm hugs.<sup>\*\*</sup>

The Red Elvises work and play within the borderlands between surf and disco, American and Russian culture, and sensitive and seductive masculinity. They bridge the gap between popular entertainment and art and straddle the line between independent musicians and entrepreneurs. Three Russians—whose homeland connotes repression, Big Brother, and state-control—playing surf music, rockabilly, and disco—connoting a laid-back, relaxed attitude and fun—and singing about sex, affirms the American dream, all the while inducing foot-tapping and booty shaking. As they tour the country in the big red

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<sup>\*</sup> Later, he and I both laughed as we agreed that it would have been a good pick-up line.

<sup>\*\*</sup> As “Thesis Girl” I also had the opportunity to kidnap Rock from a gaggle of drunk girls.

van, “Mr. Fabulous,”\* their “big fat road manager,” sells bushels of Red Elvises merchandise everywhere they go. Like Elvis Presley himself, they are polysemic, evolutionary entertainers. Unlike the King of Rock and Roll, they are capitalists, but not sell-outs: they consciously command their own destiny. Operating in the unmapped territory of rokenrol, they embrace capitalism, but not the “culture industry.” Asks Bernov, “What’s commercial, and what’s being true to yourself? ‘Commercial’ just means everyone listens to it, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”<sup>12</sup>

Like other American-ethnic performers, they personify the American “stew” metaphor of multiculturalism, fusing their heritage and musical interest like various Irish-American bands (Flogging Molly, Dropkick Murphys) have done with punk and Celtic folk music or Hispanic artists (from El Vez to Gloria Estefan to Ricky Martin) have done with pop music and Latin rhythms. The Red Elvises deconstruct rock and roll history, Russian identity, and sexual imagery, and then re-encode them together and resignify them with humor. They claim to create simplified music but the blend—holding firmly onto each of its cultural elements—is more complex than any Russian folk group or three-chord rock group. This difference is a double-edged sword. In that their charm revolves around their resistance to pop music hegemony—they do what *they* want to do—the band appeals to everyone except the ideal teenybopper consumers to whom MTV and popular music is marketed.

The Red Elvises symbolize the end of the Cold War, and they market their Russian-American shtick to Russians as well as Americans. For almost a half century after World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were diametrically opposed, mortal enemies with nuclear weapons poised to blow the other away; now the video for

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\* The multi-pierced “Mr. Fabulous,” also known as “Peanut,” is actually named Phelan Davis.



“I Wanna See You Bellydance” can be seen on Russian MTV. The *Voice of America* segment about the Red Elvies is almost ironic because, even when a girlfriend claims that the clown gets “weepy” as Carlotta says about Bernov, an American rock and roll band comprised of Russian émigrés is better capitalist propaganda than any of the Cold War broadcasts the Soviet government spent millions of dollars jamming.<sup>113</sup> In the 1950s, McCarthy induced the Red Scare, complete with blacklists and passionate patriots proclaiming “Better dead than Red!” In *Six String Samurai*, the Russians nuked the United States, leaving only a vast wasteland. Now the Reds have invaded again, this time marking their American conquest one set of wiggling hips at a time.

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